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THURSDAY HIGHLIGHTS

+ Secretary-General begins series of meetings with 14-member informal contact group on Somalia; participants emphasize importance of disarmament of all Somali factions as prerequisite for continuation of humanitarian relief programme.

+ To support Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and in response to requests from PLO leader and Israeli Foreign Minister, Secretary-General sets up high-level Task Force to facilitate economic and social development of Gaza Strip and Jericho.

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Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has begun a series of meetings with an informal contact group on Somalia, comprising the Permanent Representatives to the United Nations of Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the United States and Zimbabwe. A United Nations spokesman said today that the meetings would allow for an informal exchange of views with States which have contributed troops to the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II) or which are interested in developments in the country.

Addressing the group yesterday, the Secretary-General noted that while much attention had been focused on the security situation in southern Mogadishu, the Somali people were working hard throughout the country to restore order to their lives. The United Nations and various agencies and organizations were helping them in that effort. In the political sphere, on the basis of the Agreements reached by the Somali parties in Addis Ababa, the Organization was helping in the establishment of district and regional councils. Humanitarian progress had also been made; starvation had been largely eradicated and the death-rate from preventable diseases had been significantly reduced, he said.

The meeting had emphasized the importance of continuing the process of disarmament of all Somali factions as a prerequisite for the continued provision of humanitarian assistance and the return of refugees, according to the spokesman.

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To support the momentum of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali last night established a high-level Task Force whose focus will be the economic and social development of the Gaza Strip and Jericho, the two areas designated for Palestinian self-rule in the draft agreement between Israel and the PLO. According to a statement issued today, the Secretary-General had received requests for such a move from Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Shimon Peres, Foreign Minister of Israel.

The Task Force's priorities will be to integrate the United Nations approach to development in these areas and coordinate it with other institutions, agencies and non-governmental organizations involved in on-going projects, to avoid duplication of efforts. It will also seek to mobilize international financial support for the process. The Task Force, which begins work immediately, will prepare proposals for the Secretary-General before the General Assembly begins its upcoming session.

The members of the Task Force include the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and the Secretary-General's Special Political Advisor on the region.

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